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ABSTRACT

The significance of Bergman's "Seventh Seal" lies not in the speeches nor in the actions of the central characters but rather in the film's form, its totality created by the emotive elements of imagery and sound together with the intellectual elements of actions and words. The scene-units are related to a central motif (the opening of the seventh seal in the "Book of Revelations") and they trace the reactions of the characters to this sentence of death. Each character, directly or indirectly, searches for meaning within the perspective of a meaningless universe ravaged by the plague; e.g., the Knight, unable to find values in the Crusades, attempts to find significance in the game of chess with Death. The voices of the flagellants, the hedonists, the cynics, the pathetic, and most of the main characters are all drawn together in the knight's deserted castle, and their lives are closed by the girl's final, "It is finished." Only Joseph, Mia, and their son Michael pass through the storm to meet a new bright dawn. (LH)

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# The Seventh Seal

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Ingmar Bergman's title, *The Seventh Seal*, is taken from "The Book of Revelations", sometimes referred to as the "Apocalypse of St. John the Divine" (*cf., New Testament*, in particular chapters 5-8), in which the apostle John sees in an apocalyptic vision the destruction of the universe and its re-creation in the form of the New Jerusalem. The Lamb holds a book, "a book written within and on the backside, sealed with seven seals". With the opening of the seals, war, plague, famine, and death destroy mankind; the earth is shaken by a great earthquake, the moon becomes as blood, and the stars of Heaven fall into the sea. With the breaking of the seventh seal the cataclysmic events affecting man and nature are suspended:

> And when he had opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven about the space of half an hour.
> And I saw the seven angels which stood before God; and to them were given seven trumpets.

The respite is momentary, for as each angel sounds his trumpet a new series of destructions befall man.

Although this passage from "Revelations" is read at the end of the film as Death claims his winnings, the opening of the seventh seal, the unleashing of death, is not established in the film primarily as an act of finality but as a manifestation of the human condition, existence in the midst of annihilating forces which render traditional values and concepts of salvation meaningless. Throughout the film the action is centered upon the reactions of man in the face of this manifestation. Consequently, the passage from "Revelations" serves to draw together and to make explicit the dominant symbolic patterns established early in the film, rather than simply to underscore a concluding act of destruction. The film's final movement, or coda, which follows this quotation climaxes the death-in-life and life-in-death motifs developed throughout the film: The Angel of Death has passed over Mia and Jof and their son Mikael, who face the dawn radiantly, and has gathered up his victims, who dance away from the dawn toward the dark lands while the rain washes clean the tears of salt from their faces. *These are the terms which constitute the revelation*

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*of* THE SEVENTH SEAL. The film ends with the passing of the storm and with the arrival of a new dawn bathed in light—a conclusion which stands in sharp contrast to the dull laden dawn of the preceding day.

It is the apocalyptic imagery of death and destruction which opens the film: the body of a gull appears darkly as the music reaches a crescendo, the knight kneels in prayer surrounded by a long expanse of sand and ocean, dark clouds blot the western horizon, the heat dries out the land. Ironically, Death manifests himself on the final day of the Knight's return home from a ten-year crusade, a crusade which according to the Squire was "a madness that only a real idealist could have thought up". The crusade is not only a source of disillusionment because it failed to provide the meaning to life which is the Knight's quest, but because it was in itself a manifestation of the meaninglessness of life, of death-in-life. The Priest Raval, who once convinced the Knight to journey to the Holy Land and who is later discovered scavenging amongst the bodies of the plague-ridden, is addressed by the Squire with the honorary title of Dr. Mirabilis, Coelestis et Diabilis (i.e., Dr. Extraordinaire, heavenly and diabolical). The presence of Death in the opening scene is, then, the concrete manifestation of an already existing state:

> Death: I have been walking by your side for a long time.
> Knight: That I know.

The game of chess symbolizes existence viewed within the perspective of death. The white against the black—white moves first as the act of creation necessarily precedes destruction. (Knight: the condition is that I may live as long as I hold out against you.) If the player recognizes that life's opponent is death and meaninglessness, he may use his skill (the gift of life) to the best of his ability; the game may become the means by which man can perform a meaningful act. The knight's search for meaning becomes his *raison d'être*:

> Death: Why do you want to play chess with me?
> Knight: I have my reasons.

Note that while in the Morality play *Everyman* the protagonist when confronted by death is reprieved momentarily to redeem his own soul for his future life, Bergman's Knight attempts to perform an act which will have made his life (about to be past) meaningful.

Although Bergman's central symbols, the game of chess and the plague, are appropriate to the medieval setting, the significance with which they are endowed marks their affinity with many modern works in which man

is viewed as alienated from traditional values, as condemned and isolated within a universal or social wasteland (*cf.* in particular Eliot's *The Waste-land*, "The Hollowmen"; Hemingway's *Farewell to Arms, The Sun Also Rises*; Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby;* Kafka's *The Trial*; Camus' *The Outsider, The Plague*; Beckett's *Waiting for Godot, Endgame*). Authors directly or indirectly influenced by the existentalist philosophers portray man's condition as an anguished search for meaning within the perspective of a meaningless universe. Bergman's Knight is in the midst of such an anguished search while his Squire, Jons, who lives in a relatively solipsistic "Jons-world" believable only to himself, finds consolation in not having to think in terms of God's existence, of eternity, or of life's meaning.

> Knight: God, You who are somewhere, who *must* be somewhere, have mercy upon us.
> Jons: I could have given you an herb to purge you of your worries about eternity. Now it seems to be too late. But in any case, feel the immense triumph of this last minute when you can still roll your eyes and move your toes.
> Karin: Quiet, quiet.
> Jons: I shall be silent, but under protest.

But Jons self-sufficient philosophy neither consoles the dying Raval nor satisfies the questing Knight. In effect, man cannot be completely satisfied by such a starkly realistic and somewhat cynical response. Whereas the traditional hero could perceive the enemy and perhaps through a heroical, self-sacrificing act could defeat the forces of evil and thereby find meaning in existence, the existentalist "hero" is condemned by forces for which he does not seem responsible and over which he has no control; consequently heroic actions are impossible as the enemy is a condition of existence. Man can only courageously face the meaninglessness of existence and defy it by, paradoxically, attempting to create his own meaning. (Note that the Knight fails to find meaning in the Holy Crusade, a situation which perhaps symbolizes the emptiness of traditional concepts of heroical actions.) The plague is the social manifestation of the invincible, implacable scourge of Death, a force that man cannot defeat, the meaninglessness he cannot avoid. Whereas the plague symbolizes the omnipresence and omnipotence of Death, the game of chess establishes the potential for meaningful action.

> Knight: No one can live in the face of death, knowing that all is nothingness.

Death: Most people never reflect about either death or the futility of life.

Knight: But one day they will have to stand at that last moment of life and look toward the darkness.

It is through the game of chess that the Knight is able to face Death and *personally* search for meaning. The transcendental or transpersonal structures (here represented by the Church and the Crusade) which have been traditionally associated with providing meaning to life have failed. The individual must courageously act alone in the face of death. (Note that the Knight is defeated at chess through his confession to the Church. Just as the man who convinced him of the value of the Crusade turns out to be plague-ridden, so the Father Confessor turns out to be Death.) It is one of the central paradoxes of tht film that once the Knight faces death-in-life, he finds meaning through sharing a moment with Mia and Jof, characters who remain unconscious of the positive values they reflect in the midst of death.

In contrast to the Knight who arrives home to find it a wasteland and who awakens to a vision of Death, Jof (Joseph) awakens to a vision of the Virgin Mary and Child, a vision of regeneration, of the continuity of life.

> . . . The wind causes the trees to sway slightly. The leaves stir and there is a soft murmur. The flowers and the grass bend gracefully, and somewhere a bird raises its voice in a long warble.
>
> Jof's face breaks into a smile and his eyes fill with tears. With a dazed expression he sits flat on his behind while the grass rustles softly, the bees and butterflies hum around his head. The unseen bird continues to sing.
>
> Suddenly, the breeze stops blowing, the bird stops singing, Jof's smile fades, the flowers and grass wilts in the heat.

Jof attempts to explain the nature of his visionary experience to the doubting Mia (Mary):

> It wasn't a vision. It was real, absolutely real . . . But it was real, I tell you, not the kind of reality you see everyday, but a different kind.

While the Squire represents the life force self-sufficient, content with the

triumphant feeling of rolling the eyes and wiggling the toes, and the Knight desires a reality and a God that can be reduced to simple understandable terms ("I want knowledge, not faith, not suppositions, but knowledge. I want God to stretch out his hand toward me, reveal Himself and speak to me."), Jof represents man's intuitive nature, that aspect of man which is capable of glimpsing a reality that is not the "reality you see everyday". His vision is not transcendental; it emanates from the center of reality: the Virgin and Child appear in the midst of regenerated nature, surrounded by leaves and swaying grass untouched by the drying heat; and it is ironical that Mia is incapable of understanding the true nature of Jof's vision, for she and Mikael (Michael—literally, "who is like God") are the physical counterparts of Jof's vision. Though Mia taunts Jof for his faith in his visions, the audience has experienced the vision through Jof's eyes and cannot so readily dismiss it. At the end of the film, it is Jof's ability to perceive Death playing chess with the Knight that permits him to escape with his wife and child through the forest ("the valley of the shadow of death"). As clown, juggler, magician, Jof represents that aspect of man (he is to play the Soul of Man) which strives to bridge the gap between the natural and the supernatural, which strives to represent a reality beyond reality. It is his dream that "Mikael will grow up to be a great acrobat—or a juggler who can do the one impossible trick—to make one of the balls stand absolutely still in the air". He dreams that his son will be able to transcend the limits of reality (nature), a dream connected through the religious symbolism of the names Jof, Mia, and Mikael with Christ's transcendence of nature through the mystery of the resurrection, "the state of standing absolutely still", outside the laws and limitations of time and change, beyond death. It is not relevant that the trick is impossible (i.e., as conceived by common sense); what is important is that it is a father's dream for his son, a hope for the future of man.

Though Mia and Jof perform their farcical play in the midst of death, their faith in the continuity and promise of life remains undaunted primarily because their "faith" is an unconscious act. When the Knight warns Jof that the plague has reached the area where they are engaged to play next, Jof accepts it as a fact of life: "Really. Well, sometimes life is a little hard." Later when the Knight attempts to communicate his intellectual anguish, Mia cannot understand him.

Knight: Faith is a torment, did you know that? It is like loving someone who is out there in the darkness but never appears, no matter how loudly you call.

Mia: I don't understand what you mean.

Knight: Everything I've said seems meaningless and unreal while I sit here with you and your husband. How unimportant it all becomes suddenly.

As the Knight partakes of their simple offering of strawberries and milk (a natural eucharist symbol), he realizes that this is a moment of communion, and as such, it is a sign of the meaning inherent in the act of living.

> I shall remember this moment. The silence, the twilight, the bowls of strawberries and milk, your faces in the evening light. Mikael sleeping, Jof with his lyre. I'll try to remember what we have talked about. I'll carry this memory between my hands as carefully as if it were a bowl filled to the brim with fresh milk. (He turns his face away and looks out toward the sea and the colorless gray sky.) And it will be an adequate sign—it will be enough for me.

If we look solely to this speech, or to the philosophy of the Squire, or to the symbolic significance of Mia and Jof for the meaning of *The Seventh Seal*, we shall have missed what Bergman has set out to create. For the significance of Bergman's film does not lie in the speech (the overtly rationalized) nor in the actions of the central characters (the overtly dramatized), but in the film's totality. Consequently, the significance of *The Seventh Seal* is not formed by casually related sequences of action nor through a dramatized dialectic of characters; rather it lies in the form, the totality created by the interaction between the emotive elements (the imagery and sound) and the intellectual elements (the actions and words), elements which could be expressed as the connotative and denotative aspects of the film. Just as the Knight sees the Sign as a combination of all the elements which make up that particular moment, so the significance of the film is through the total harmony of all its elements, what Bergman perhaps means when he speaks of "picture thinking" as capable of achieving "a reality beyond reality".

Bergman orchestrates various separate scenic units around a central motif (the game of chess)—the opening of the seventh seal. What each scenic unit does, whether related directly to the Knight's return home or not, is to trace the various reactions to the sentence of death, reactions which are played in predominantly different keys.

Monk: Do you know, you insensible fools, that you shall die today or tomorrow, or the next day, because all of you

have been sentenced? Do you hear what I say? Do you hear the word? You have been sentenced, sentenced.

There are those who burn others or flagellate themselves in order to appease a wrathful God (the Grotesque); those who, like Skat and Lisa, resort to a hedonism as a form of escape (the Farcical); and those who remain unaffected because "Everything is worth precisely as much as a belch, the only difference being that a belch is more satisfying" (the Satirical and Cynical); and those who cannot face the darkness without the knowledge of meaning, or purpose (the Tragic and Pathetic); and, finally, those who intuitively sense that the continuity of life and the meaning of life are immanent (the Lyrical and Comic). All these voices are drawn together in the Knight's deserted castle and closed by the Girl's final words, "It is finished" (Consummatum Est), except the lyrical voice of Jof:

Jof: They dance away from the dawn and it's a solemn dance towards the dark lands, while the rain washes their faces and cleans the salt from their cheeks. (His son, Mikael has listened to his words. Now he crawls up to Mia and sits in her lap)

Mia: (smiling): You with your visions and dreams.